

SILVER HUGO
Chicago International
Film Festival

**SPECIAL JURY
MENTION**
AFI Film Festival

**BEST OF FESTIVAL
SELECTION**
Edinburgh Film Festival



gaea girls

A film by **KIM LONGINOTTO** and **JANO WILLIAMS**



A WOMEN MAKE MOVIES RELEASE

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GAEA GIRLS

A film by Kim Longinotto and Jano Williams

Synopsis

Kim Longinotto's and Jano Williams' latest film is a fascinating look at the physically grueling and mentally exhausting training regimen of Japanese women wrestlers who aspire to be part of the much-coveted *Gaea Girls*. The Gaea circuit is a homegrown version of the World Wrestling Foundation and its costumes and theatrical grappling are a low-budget facsimile of Western wrestling – no fancy martial arts and sumo moves here. The film takes us inside the Gaea training camp where you will meet several young recruits including Wakabayashi, who ran away the first time around; Sato, a spindly 16 year old, who has waited patiently to join for 3 years; and Nagay Chigusa, the shock-haired, pugnacious fighter in charge of the training camp. But the most heart-wrenching story of all is that of Takeuchis; she is routinely humiliated by Nagayo and reduced to a sniveling, bloodied wreck when it is all too evident that, in sparring bout after sparring bout, she lacks sheer bodyweight and strength to attempt to understand those who would go against Japan's apparent preference for all things demure, restrained and where women are concerned.

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Film Festivals

Chicago International Film Festival, Silver Hugo
AFI Film Festival, Special Jury Mention
Edinburgh International Film Festival, Best of Festival Selection
Toronto Film Festival
Berlin International Film Festival
San Francisco International Film Festival
Margaret Mead Film Festival
Double Take Film Festival
Sheffield Documentary Film Festival
Doclands, Dublin
Cork, Ireland
Rencontres Internationales de Cinema a Paris
Double Take Documentary Film Festival
Sydney Film Festival, Australia
Taipei International Film Festival, Taiwan
DocAviv, Israel
Hong Kong International Film Festival
Munich Documentary Festival
Films de Femmes, Creteil, Paris
Sao Paulo International Film Festival, Brazil
Singapore International Film Festival
South By Southwest, USA

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QUOTES

"A stand out! Anyone with preconceived notions about Asian women being delicate subservient flowers should come away from the film with a new outlook."

— *NewTimesLA.com*

"Fascinating"

— *Hollywood Reporter*

"Longinotto and Williams' ability to penetrate facades is remarkable. The filmmakers build their story in a way that's more compelling and suspenseful than many narrative films."

— *Chicago Film Festival*

"Gaea Girls is about more than wrestling. Like "Divorce Iranian Style" it smashes preconceptions about the women it depicts, transcending it's subject in the process."

— *Kay Armatage, Toronto International Film Festival*

"This fascinating film follows the physically grueling and mentally exhausting training regimen of several young wanna-be 'Gaea Girls', a group of Japanese women wrestlers. The idea of them may seem like a total oxymoron in a country where women are usually regarded as docile and subservient. However, in training and in the arena, the female wrestlers depicted in this film are just as

violent as any member of the World Wrestling Federation, and the blood that's drawn is very real indeed. One recruit, Takeuchi, endures ritual humiliation not seen on screen since the boot camp sequences of 'Full Metal Jacket'. In 'Divorce Iranian Style', Kim Longinotto cinematically explored the previously unexplored world of the Tehran divorce courts. Working with co-director Jano Williams, Longinotto has been given access to shoot an insider's verité account of this closely guarded universe."
— *Chicago Film Festival*

GAEA GIRLS

A film by Kim Longinotto and Jano Williams

Directors

Kim Longinotto
Jano Williams

Camera

Kim Longinotto

Editor

Brian Tagg

Sound Recordist

Mary Milton

England • 2000 • 106 minutes • Color • 35mm
Japanese with English Subtitles

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FILMMAKERS' STATEMENT

Perhaps you'll have the same mix of emotions when you watch this film as we had making it. We were gripped by the stories as they developed and were both inspired and horrified by Takeuchi's determination to make her debut in the ring no matter what. During the filming we found ourselves thinking about ambition, power and courage. They were played out so graphically in front of us. Perhaps we are also witnessing the end of a time in Japan when young women are prepared to make such great sacrifices on every other level in order to realize their dreams. Above all, we feel enormous affection and respect for these *Gaea Girls* and hope you will too. — Kim Longinotto & Jano Williams

GAEA GIRLS

DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHIES



KIM LONGINOTTO studied film and directing at the National Film School. While there, she made *Pride Of Place*, a critical look at her boarding school, and *Theater Girls*, about a hostel for homeless women in London. After the NFS she worked as camera on a variety of documentaries. During this time she made *Cross and Passion*, about Catholic women on the Turf Lodge estate in Belfast and *Underage*, about unemployed adolescents in Coventry. She then made *Fireraiser* with Claire Hunt, about Sir Author “Bomber” Harris. Claire and Kim then made *Eat the Kimono* about Hanayagi Genshu, a Japanese dancer and activist, *Hidden Faces* about Egyptian women and *The Good Wife Of Tokyo* about women love and marriage in Japan. Through out this time she made a series of ten broadcast and non-broadcast videos on special need issues including *Tragic But Brave* for Channel Four. With Jano Williams, she then made *Dream Girls* about the Takarazuka theater revue in Japan and *Shinjuku Boys* about women in Tokyo who choose to live as men. After that, she made *Rock Wives* for Channel 4 about the wives and girlfriends of rock stars and the following year *Divorce Iranian Style* with Ziba Mir Hosseini, set in family law Court in Tehran, about women and divorce in Iran. She then made two short films for the *Best Friends* series on Channel 4—*Steve and Dave*, about two friends who work as a drag act, and *Rob and Chris*, about two homeless young men. Then she made *Gaea Girls* with Jano Williams about a young girl's struggle to become a professional wrestler in Japan. Her latest film *Runaway* was made with Ziba Mir-Hosseini and is set in a refuge for girls in Tehran. She is currently planning to make a new film in the US.

Filmography

Pride of Place 1979; *Theater Girls* 1980; *Cross and Passion* 1983; *Underage* 1985; *Fireraiser* 1989; *Eat the Kimono* 1990; *Hidden Faces* 1991; *The Good Wife of Tokyo* 1992; *Dream Girls* 1993; *Tragic but Brave* 1994; *Shinjuku Boys* 1995; *Rock Wives* 1996; *Mike Leigh* 1997; *Divorce Iranian Style* 1998; *Steve and Dave* 1999; *Rob and Chris* 1999; *Gaea Girls* 2000; *Runaway* 2001

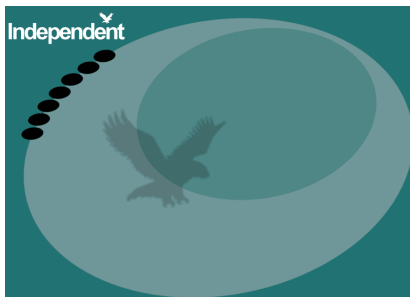
GAEA GIRLS

DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHIES

JANO WILLIAMS went to Japan in 1974 intending to stay one year and didn't come home for 14. While there she worked at the Japanese Broadcasting Corporation NHK, her work involved the making of radio programmes about the individuals and structures that make up Japanese society. She subsequently moved to the television company NTV. She learned Japanese and became totally immersed in the Japanese way of life and contributed many articles to Japanese newspapers and magazines. A year after her return to England she went back to Japan with Kim Longinotto to make *Eat the Kimono* (1990) about the radical woman performer Hanayagi Genshu. This was followed by *Dream Girls* (1993) about the all women Takarazuka Dance Theatre and then *Shinjuku Boys* (1995) about young transsexual men who had been born with women's bodies. Subsequently she went back to film in Japan for another production company in the course of which she first met the Gaea girls. She is now living in Bristol and hopes to continue making films about the Japan that reflect her bond with that country.

Filmography

Eat the Kimono (1990); *Dream Girls* (1993); *Shinjuku Boys* (1995); *Gaea Girls* (2000)



Independent.co.uk

An interview with Kim Longinotto by Fiona Morrow

'I wept as we filmed them fight'

Kim Longinotto's documentary about Japanese female wrestlers is shockingly brutal. She tells Fiona Morrow that it reminded her of boarding school

16 August 2000

Gaea girls take their sport seriously: these Japanese women are professional wrestlers with punishing training regimes and spartan lives. Their training camp is a corrugated-iron shed in the countryside, where they sleep in a tiny dormitory. It's tough and requires total dedication and self-discipline; you and I would run a mile.

A world away, in her pleasant, airy flat in Islington, London, the documentary filmmaker Kim Longinotto is forcing herself to be healthy and drink water, before giving in and making a pot of tea. Real tea. She attempts a joke about anarchists and proper tea being theft but blows the punchline, laughs anyway and sits down on the floor.

Her last film was the award-winning *Divorce Iranian Style*, which followed the proceedings in a Tehran family court where, although the atmosphere was often heated and angry, no one came to blows. *Gaea Girls* is a completely different ringside experience: women willingly submit to terrible humiliation and physical abuse.

Gentle and unassuming, Longinotto is the very last person I would have expected to turn her camera on such a subject. When I tell her, she seems a little surprised herself: "It is a disturbing film," she agrees. "Very stark and bare. I love it, but I'm also frightened of it."

It wasn't supposed to be this way: "I believed that wrestling was all show," she explains, "and that we were going to make a film about wonderfully dedicated women athletes." She and her collaborator, Jano Williams, were shocked to find the girls fighting for real: "In a way, the more disturbing it got, the more hooked we became."

The focus of the film shifts to follow one trainee, Takeuchi, as she prepares for her "test", the culmination of a year's training, which she must pass if she is to become a professional Gaea wrestler. As the beatings she receives grow in brutality and danger, we are asked to question our feelings towards

not just the abusive teaching methods, but the institutional hierarchy which supports them. It's a system Longinotto found uncomfortably familiar: "It reminded me of public school," she tells me. "The rules and the sadism. They are trying to break the girls' spirit, and that's what boarding schools do to make you conform. And you leave and you're completely fucked up."

At school she desperately tried to fit in: "Nobody liked me," she says dispassionately. It was the sharp end of an unhappy childhood, and at 17 she left her parent's flat on Kensington High Street to live rough.

"It was a silly thing to do," she insists. "It was about being totally naive and not realising how horrible it was going to be. The people I met on the streets had been chucked out or abused, but I always knew that I could go back." She hitched and worked her way around Europe, ending up in Istanbul, extremely ill. "It was almost like going to the depths of degradation to cleanse myself of my awful upbringing; I wanted to be rid of it, rid of them."

She did go home long enough to apply for university, after which she flirted with the idea of a PhD on the modern novel but caught the film-making bug on a course at Bristol and pursued her new passion at the National Film and Television School.

"I loved the National," she beams. "You had total freedom and you could work at your own pace." For her first-year film she returned to her boarding school: "It was so good to go back and see that it wasn't me – they were really weird. It was my revenge, and they hated it – my headmistress called me a class traitor; I was so flattered. I needed to do it, and it probably saved me years of therapy."

Longinotto certainly seems pretty sorted, her natural modesty translating into a very understated documentary style: she follows people living their lives, is sensitive to their emotions, and is always prepared to let the film go to the story rather than vice versa; she never appears in the frame. "I like to go in and not disrupt anything at all. The crew don't talk to each other, you don't make any noise, you're very passive. You don't ever tell anyone to do anything, not even to walk into the room again if you missed it."

This yearning for quiet and harmony is also traced back to her childhood: "I've got a horror of fuss and noise," she explains, her familiar nervous giggle barely suppressed. "And I think it comes back to when I was a kid and my dad was a photographer. There were all these lights and I'd have to have my hair done – such a fuss for a stupid photograph – and I remember being really upset by the whole thing. I had to do commercials as well, and you'd do everything millions of times, so maybe that's why I never want to do things in that way."

Longinotto's recollections are slightly unnerving: it's as if her desire for equanimity has flattened the emotion out of her memories. She provides another example: after a walk with her boyfriend and a friend she received a message that her mother had died. "I came into the living-room and said, 'Now, I don't want you to be upset, but my mum just died. Shall I make tea?' And they looked at me, horrified. I'm not a cold person," she rushes to assure me; "there was just nothing between us, and it was much more upsetting to realise that than not to see her."

Back in Japan, Gaea's No 1 wrestler and mentor to the team, Nagayo, refers to the girls as her "children"; she sees herself as their surrogate mother, every blow she inflicts as painful to her as it is to them. Asked about her methods, she talks of her own bitter relationship with her violent father, revelling in her now superior strength. "I bet you're lonely now, father, because I'm better than you," she smiles.

"When we met Nagayo we really felt her charisma," Longinotto recalls. "She'd come into the gym and we'd sort of stand to attention; she was the boss and we respected her. After that interview we talked for ages about what she said, because in a way, in her own logic, she's right. She wants to provoke the killer

instinct in the girls, and it is going to be harder for them in the ring if they are lax or careless; they could get killed. But what really struck me is that she still hates her father, and in a way she's talking about herself, because the girls are going to hate her and won't need her."

Gaea Girls' most shocking sequence comes during Takeuchi's test, when Nagayo jumps in and hits and kicks her around the ring: "I think that Takeuchi thought Nagayo might kill her," Longinotto says. "There was this awful sense of electricity; we didn't know what was going to happen, and it felt very wild; there was something truly unhinged about it." She wept as she filmed, and Williams was so distressed, she had to leave. "I'm really glad that we made the film, because everyone there – including a crew from Japanese television – thought we were crazy to react in that way. Then we watched the film the other crew made. It was fascinating because the violence just wasn't there. It was almost as if they didn't see it."